

# The INQUIRER

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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7792 14 April 2012

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## *Chennai Unitarians inspire*





# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
General Assembly of the Unitarian and  
Free Christian Churches 2001*

**The Inquirer** is published fortnightly  
by The Inquirer Publishing Company  
(2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

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## Inquiring Words



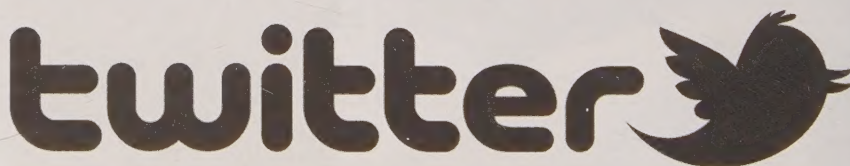
*Our world is one world:  
its ways of wealth affect us all:  
the way we spend, the way we share,  
who are the rich or poor,  
who stand or fall?*

*from the hymn 'Our World is One World,' by Cecily Taylor*

*Photo: Young Unitarians in Chennai*

Although the General Assembly meetings in Keele will have ended before you receive this *Inquirer*. This edition went to press just as they got underway.

A full-colour edition of *The Inquirer*, featuring will reports and photos from the meetings, will appear in a fortnight.



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# Chennai – a beacon of Unitarianism

By Maud Robinson

'Did you have a great time?' 'Did you have a nice holiday?' 'I hope you had an enjoyable time.' These are typical questions and comments you get when returning from any trip abroad. I heard all of them when I arrived back from my trip to India, to visit our partner church in Chennai. I found myself struggling to find appropriate responses which were honest, but didn't necessitate in-depth explanations of all the nuances of my feelings about the trip. While I was in India, I continued my spiritual practice, each evening, of writing down

what I was most thankful for during that day. This is what I wrote on my final evening in Chennai: "Today, as I get ready to leave Chennai, I thank God for a very warm relationship which I have built with the Rev Harrison and his family. But, if I'm really honest, most of all I thank God that I'm going home tonight. I'm looking forward to a long soak in the bath, and to not gagging with the stench every few minutes as I walk down the street. Long may I retain this sense of privilege and thankfulness for the comfort of the life that I have in Edinburgh."

I had come full circle since my first entry three weeks previously, when I wrote this: "Today, I give thanks to God to be reminded of the ease of my life in Scotland, as all my senses were assaulted by chaotic, filthy, smelly life, lived out on the streets by so many people in Chennai. And among this chaos and filth, the women look resplendent in magnificent saris, with flowers in their hair, as they perch nonchalantly side-saddle on small motor bikes, weaving perilously through the completely undisciplined traffic chaos."

The first thing that strikes you on arrival in India is that it is a land of such contrasts: the filth and stench, contrasting with the beautifully turned out children, emerging from the slums where they live; and the very apparent contrast between rich and poor, with fancy new corporate buildings, and big posh hotels, sitting cheek by jowl with crowded slums. Across the road from the hotel where I stayed, there was a slum settlement of rickety shacks, and each night on the pavement just beside the hotel door, families bedded down to sleep. I feel ashamed that I was so squeamish about the griminess of the cheap hotel where I was staying; and that I found it necessary to retreat to posh hotels on several occasions, to spend a few hours in cool cleanliness, in order to regain my equilibrium, and be able to go out and face the streets again. I quickly had to be honest with myself, and accept that I could only take 'real India' for a couple of days at a time. I have no regrets about having made the trip. It was a rich and rewarding experience. The fact that I found it so difficult only added to its richness. I am glad that I made the trip, because I could bring back to my congregation, with zeal and with absolute conviction, the message that the Chennai Fund, which channels money donated by Scottish Unitarians, is well and wisely used. Although it is the tiniest droplet of help in an ocean of need, that tiny droplet affects individual lives in deep and radical ways.



Young members of the Chennai Unitarian Church greeted Maud Robinson and Jon Bagust.

The Chennai Unitarian Christian Church has been partnered with Edinburgh and Glasgow Unitarians for a number of years and depends on the support that we give for their social outreach projects. Unitarianism in Chennai dates from 1795, when a church was founded by a local Tamil, William Roberts (aka Mudaliar Thiruvengatam Vellala), who had read and been inspired by the works of British and American Unitarians. Its nearest Unitarian neighbours are in the Khasi hills of northern India, over 1,000 miles away.

The Sunday service I attended at the Chennai church had many things in common with Unitarian services in Ireland and Britain; basically a good old 'hymn sandwich,' with biblical readings and a sermon. The singing has a very definite Tamil flavour, which I do not have the musical knowledge to describe, but which falls within a system of Indian music called Carnatic. Hymns are sung both in Tamil and English; they do a particularly rousing rendition of "We Shall Overcome," which was a joy to take part in. Being the only Tamil Unitarian congregation in the world, the congregation has published their own Tamil service book; the hymns being translations from Unitarian and other Christian hymn books. Partway through the service the electricity was cut, and the lights, fans and P.A. system went off. I had been warned that this would happen, as it does for a period every morning due to a government energy saving drive. As this was a big celebratory service, with guests from Scotland, a generator had been hired for the morning, so when the lights went out we waited patiently while Prem, the church caretaker, fired up the generator and the service continued, without any fuss on the part of their minister the Rev Harrison Kingsley.

Harrison and his family are the power houses behind the church in Chennai. His father and grandfather were ministers of the church before him; you have to remember that this is a completely isolated Unitarian community, with no pool of ministers from which to draw. Harrison draws no stipend for his work as minister; he works full-time as a teacher, and ministers to the congregation, in his 'spare time.' His wife, Jayanthi, is deeply involved in leading the youth programme and in providing pastoral care, and his two college-going children are involved in many and varied ways, including providing music for services. The accounting and administration for the church and the Chennai Fund is done by Harrison's mother Mrs Merlin Gabriel – a colossus of a woman in a miniscule body. Mrs Gabriel's father, her husband and her son have been ministers to this community, and she is deeply committed to its work. She is quiet and completely self-effacing, but a tower of strength.

With the aid of finance from the Chennai Fund, some 20 young members of the congregation are receiving scholarships that enable them to move into higher levels of schooling or further education. Furthermore, over a period of time,

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# I am very proud to be a Unitarian

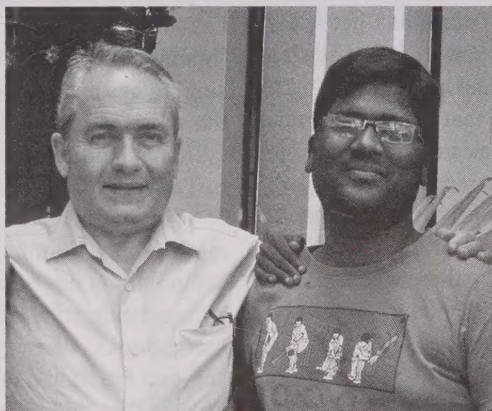
By Jon Bagust

Karthikeyan, one of the young men, who was able to attend college because of a scholarship from the Chennai Fund, spoke of the values he had learned through the youth programme at the Chennai church, and of how he had been inspired by the church's teaching about thankfulness and outreach to others.

Over the 15 years that I've been visiting the church and village school it's been my privilege, to follow the lives of the young people, and to witness how their lives have benefited from being church members and from our support of their various social outreach projects. I asked Karthikeyan, whom I have known since he was a young boy, and who is now in his mid-20s, if he could answer some questions to help us understand what it means to be a young member of the Chennai Unitarian Christian Church. What I knew from our conversations was that he had passed many examinations at school and college, and had now become an accountant. He continues to study to become a fully qualified chartered accountant.

**Q Why do you enjoy being a member of your church, and what have you gained by being a member?**

A First I must say that I am very proud to be a member of our Unitarian Church. Being a member, I especially enjoy the weekly Sunday prayer services we hold in our church, really it's very spiritual, and has helped me a lot in my life, to lead a good life. Some years ago we formed a Unitarian Youth Association, which is an add-on to the Sunday services. We are all like a family for our church members. We share our joy, in prayer together for others. This sharing



Jon Bagust with Karthikeyan

always leads people to be attached with one other in the very best sense.

**Q What do you do in the church?**

A As youths we take a part in all our church activities like organising and taking part in church events (singing and drama). We conduct youth meetings every week on Sundays. The main purpose of the meetings is to share our experiences during that week, counselling the other youths on matters relating to study, career guidance and talking about church activities. Every year we visit the village, as we have just done during Pongal holidays, and conduct the events such as singing, drawing and sports.

**Q Did the scholarship fund prove helpful for you?**

A Yes, the scholarship that I received from our church really helped me a lot to make the payment to my college fee. This has helped me to continue my study without any interruption. Now, like me there are a number of students getting scholarships from our church for their schooling, as well as college fees.

*Later this year the Chennai Fund plans to launch a scheme inviting Unitarians all over the UK, and further afield, to sponsor an individual child or young person through their education, with the possibility of setting up some communication between donor and recipient. Watch this space for further details. In the meantime, you can view photographs of the 2012 trip to Chennai on Facebook. Search for "Unitarians in Edinburgh" on [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com).*

*Jon Bagust is a member of Edinburgh Unitarians.*

## Young people show commitment

*(Continued from previous page)*

the church has built up a connection with the rural village of Amanambakkum, about 30 miles distant, thereby giving some help towards the education and training of children and young women. Within a school compound, provided by the Unitarian church, two school rooms provide a safe haven, especially during the rainy season. The area outside, shaded by mature trees, provides a pleasant place for teaching. About 60 children, only some of whom attend the local publicly run school, have the option of supplementing their education by attending the so-called 'night school', operating from 3pm until 6pm each day. The teachers are from the village. At the same time of day, young women in the village may be attending the sewing school, in the same premises, enabling them to set up small sewing businesses for themselves, or to work in a local clothing factory. Competition for all jobs in India is extremely fierce, but especially for the kind of jobs that can help lift a family above subsistence level. Without our contributions, the village project would not be able to continue; and when £300 pays for a new schoolroom, we know that our contributions count.

The budget of about £1,800 remitted by the Chennai Fund for 2012 will cover, among other things, salaries for the Chennai night school teacher, the village night school and sewing

school teachers, and the school caretaker, as well as equipment and books. But the largest part of the budget (about £600) will go to providing scholarships for 20 very poor and deserving students of the Chennai congregation.

One of the things that impressed me most about the Chennai church community, was the commitment of its young people. Some of these young people have been in receipt of scholarships from the Chennai Fund. Now they are working tremendously hard in college, or first jobs; but at the same time are very committed to continuing the outreach work that their church does in the night schools in Chennai and the village. A group of them travelled to the village with us to organise activities for the children, and to help with other tasks in getting things ready for the new school year.

How easy it would be for them to take their qualifications, and without a backward glance scarper into a comfortable new life. This is what so often happens. India's recent economic growth has been dazzling, but its inequalities are becoming even more polarised. And who could blame the young people if they did scarper? I found it hard to stick the conditions surrounding me in Chennai for three weeks, before desperately wanting to scarper back to my comfortable life in Edinburgh.

*The Rev Maud Robinson is minister at Edinburgh.*





Show of support for Fabrice Muamba at Blackburn Rovers on 24 March. Photo by Matthew Chadwick

## Power of prayer is an ongoing mystery

By Ant Howe

I first heard the news on the radio while writing a sermon. A footballer had collapsed on the pitch during a game.

Fabrice Muamba suffered a cardiac arrest during the match and the early indications seemed to be that it was unlikely he was going to survive.

His heart had stopped and it took 78 minutes for it to start beating again, and during that time the medics were working on him – trying to get his heart started again and trying to keep his brain supplied with oxygen.

The papers said Fabrice was “dead” for that time.

I’ve been following the story during the week and I noticed three things in particular:

One was how often the words “prayer” and “praying” were used. Straightaway, his team-mates and football fans were saying that they were praying that he would pull full.

His family issued a statement which thanked people for their prayers.

And I guess many of the people who said that they were praying were not churchgoers and probably don’t consider themselves to be religious.

I guess that one of the uses of prayer is that it allows us to be doing *something*. When we feel powerless to help or to do anything practical then the gift of prayer means that we can actually do *something*. It allows us to put into words our wishes, longings and fears.

Now there are numerous studies which seem to indicate both that prayer *does* make a difference to those who are being prayed for and also that it makes *no difference at all*.

We could debate it all day and cannot prove conclusively that prayer changes things or not.

I’m very fond of the quote “prayer doesn’t change things. Prayer changes people and PEOPLE change things.”

That’s the part I feel is true for me: when I pray for something or someone it might not necessarily change things, but it does change *me*.

I feel that I am doing something. That I’m putting my trust in the very force which created the universe. And that I’m working through the issues which are most important to me.

Whether it was the prayers which kept Fabrice alive, we’ll never know – but it’s very clear that his *family* were grateful and felt strengthened because they knew that people were praying. And perhaps that’s enough.

And that brings me to the second thing: all the prayers in the world would not have saved Fabrice if it weren’t for the practical help of the medics. If you *can’t* do anything else, then it’s OK to stand back and pray – in fact it’s probably the best thing – but if you *can* do something to help then sitting there praying is probably the last thing you should do.

If you’ve got skills and talents which can help those in need, and the situation arises, then it’s time to use them. In those circumstances just to stand by and pray may well be a sin.

The final thing about this news story is that the papers are all saying that Fabrice was dead for 78 minutes. Now, the medics were keeping him going and trying to revive him so technically he wasn’t. In fact, you are only pronounced dead when a doctor says that there is no point continuing and then medics give up.

That, to me, is an interesting definition: you’re only really dead when people give up on you.

It seems to me that for religious liberals like us, it could be a useful definition to keep in mind.

Many Unitarians shy away from words like ‘resurrection’, but Fabrice Muamba has proven to us that it’s possible for miracles to happen as long as people don’t give up and continue to do what they are best at.

For me, the fact that the message, teaching and example of Jesus continues to inspire so many, and that people have not given up on him, is the kind of resurrection I can identify with most.

I’ll continue to pray. Prayer is important to me and I think it’s a healthy thing to do, just so long as I don’t use prayer as an excuse not to take action.

And even when all seems lost, I think it helps to believe that even when we can’t do anything, there is always hope when there are people around who refuse to give up on us.

*The Rev Ant Howe is minister at Kingswood and Warwick.*



# Reverential Engagement: The work of th

## Movement begun in 2002

By Margaret Kirk

Ten years ago in April 2002 Thandeka, an American academic and Unitarian Universalist Minister, gave the prestigious Essex Hall Lecture at our General Assembly meetings and talked about covenant groups, or as we call them in the UK – Engagement Groups. She claimed that these groups had the potential to create a sense of close fellowship, a space for sharing, affirming and nurturing. And she made the arresting claim that the space in which our 'different persons, divergent beliefs and dissonant claims meet' is sacred space because it is space where we encounter God. She called this Small Group Ministry.

Since that lecture in 2002, a lot has happened. A small working group formed to take these ideas forward. Some of those inspired by the lecture took ideas straight back to their congregations and made a start. There was great excitement and, at the same time, a certain amount of confusion.

The notion of an Engagement group was difficult for many people to make sense of. Some asked, In what sense was it different from any other group? Was it a therapy or an encounter group? Was it a touchy/feely sort of thing?

Above all there was a concern – might it become a clique and alienate others in the congregation? These were real anxieties. The groups had the potential to create intimate spiritual community where people were listened to and valued in ways, perhaps, they had not experienced before but this could not work without good facilitation. Trained facilitators were needed. Many of those who wanted to be involved had been participants in the Development Skills Training Programme that ran from 1997 to 2001 and through that programme had developed a deeper understanding of the kind of skills needed in leading groups. Resourced and supported at first by the Development Committee and then by the Education and Training Commission, the working group became a panel which offered facilitation training and encouraged the setting up of regional support groups – an opportunity for leaders of groups to share their experiences and develop good practice.

By 2008 a wide variety of groups were up and running in congregations throughout the country. The activities were wide ranging, reflecting the interests of members of their congregations: *creative writing, gardening, interfaith encounters, dreams workshop, Unitarian history, cooking and eating, poetry, studying the life of Jesus* and many others. Diverse as they were, they shared the engagement principles of deepening the spiritual life of each member of the group and deepening the connection to that group's church community. Listening to each other with care and respect, allowing silence, avoiding criticism and judgement, offering a place of safety – these are the principles that underpin each group's process. During this time RE Summer School at Hucklow offered a place where the very best Engagement practice could be experienced.

Through a process of trial and error over the last decade, Engagement groups have re-invented themselves in many church communities. The title *Engagement* may not be used everywhere but the principles of engagement continue to be practised very widely.

## An act of theology

Small Group Ministries are "the people's work" for creating, sustaining, and transforming our selves, each other, and our world. The practices and procedures are informed by the premise that the foundation of religious experience begins with human affection, the primordial power that emerges whenever two or more people meet together and listen compassionately and equitably to each other. The liturgical work of creating community together enables each member of the group to feel that he or she is a-stir with creation. It is practical theology writ small.

Jesus refers to the power of Small Group Ministries when he says, "Where two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them." For liberal Christians, Jesus is there as an affirmation of the sacred nature of our humanity, the beloved community that can regenerate the broken-hearted.

In sum, the entire process entails religious ritual, engaged listening, compassionate speaking, and rational critique, and as such, is "dynamic, critical, reflective, and sustained". Each meeting is thus a liturgical act, a work of the people, and as such, is "an act of theology".

Excerpt from Essex Hall lecture given by Thandeka.

Full text available online: <http://bit.ly/zTTuEJ>

Our panel, like other panels, came to an end in the middle of last year – 2011. When we met in May for our penultimate meeting we were asked to suggest what might be taken forward to the planned Modular training programme for Local Leadership.

These were our thoughts:

*Unitarian communities need to establish intentional spiritual practices that embrace openness, honesty and commitment because these practices create community and belonging which most people are seeking. We believe this should be made explicit and an understanding of what is meant by intentional spiritual practice incorporated into the training programme at every level.*

*Specifics of Intentional Spiritual Practice:*

- Understanding relational groups as centres of trust and friendship
- Understanding the group as a centre of hospitality and welcome
- Practising openness, honesty, trust, respect
- Encouraging spiritual development in a safe setting
- Leadership training needs training in awareness for people's needs for belonging and meaning
- Establishing agreed ways of relating to each other and the regular re-visiting of these agreements
- Understanding how the more task oriented aspects of organisational leadership need practice in this spiritual foundation
- Discovering better ways to serve each other and our community

*Margaret Kirk is a retired Unitarian minister.*



# People – a decade of engagement practice

## Bright Lights in York

By Claire Wilton

Inspired by Bristol's Bright Lights, York Unitarians started its own monthly gathering for all ages in January 2010. Every fourth Sunday in the month we share stories, music, singing, games, creative activities and thinking time.

Bright Lights is designed in part for families with young children who find it difficult to come to church regularly. But we stress that people don't need to have a child to come along – it is also intended to be a space for the slightly less young who'd like to mix with people of other ages. Every session is accessible for the youngest child, but hopefully provides food for thought for adult participants too. We have up to 7 children and 12 adults who attend.

Our themes have ranged from Light, Magic and Dance to Stories of beginnings, Time and Dreams. Most of our sessions are based in the Chapel, using the apse area for circle time and the vestry / kitchen for activities and snacks. But we have also celebrated New Year and Summer Solstice outside, taken part in a local food-growing project, planted bulbs and built a hibernation den in the Chapel garden.

We have made dream-catchers, nature mobiles, sharing bunting and a huge candle collage [see below]. Our latest project is a story-blanket made of batik squares (using child-friendly flour and water paste) inspired by the illustrations in *The Everything Seed*, written by Unitarian Universalist minister Carole Martignacco.

Bright Lights has been lucky enough to benefit from me attending the Unitarian REvolution course for leaders of religious education, which ran for a year from October 2010. The course was a fantastic mix of inspiring ideas - for songs, stories, games and rituals - along with active learning about risk assessment, special needs and safeguarding. As participants we were challenged to 'up our game' and were set assignments that tested our ideas. My confidence as a leader has certainly grown, and I hope Bright Lights in York has improved as a result; though you'd better ask our regular participants about that!

York Unitarians are now trialling a new monthly Sunday morning children's session, held during the usual Sunday service, which we are calling 'Sparklers'. Our plans for Bright Lights during 2012 include sessions on friendship, journeys, Hide & Seek with God and growing.

*Claire Wilton is a member at York.*



*Bristol Bright Lights is an engagement group that encourages multi-generational relationships.*

## Bristol Bright Lights

By Lindy Latham

Are the Bright Lights Still Shining in Bristol? A brief history of an Intergenerational Engagement Group.

Five years on ...

We are a bit like a sandwich really – although we started in our very first session by making pancakes!

So you thought that Engagement Groups had to be serious and spiritual and about deep and important things?

Well, you are right, but they can be fun at the same time ...

Have you ever played balloon hockey – I mean a team of under 16's against 17 – 80 year olds? We don't usually divide up into ages, but that was great fun. The younger team shouting "it's not fair, you are taller than us" but they won anyway!

And how do sandwiches come into it?

Simple. We start our group with a welcoming, sharing and listening circle, singing a song and lighting our chalice. That is the slice of bread if you like. When the "theme" and activities have been talked about, off everyone goes to play a game, make something beautiful like painting a peace stone or simply sit and talk to catch up with friends – offer a listening ear. This time is followed by a sit down tea – a mixture of delicious and healthy. That's the filling. After joint tidying up, we gather again to share, sing, possibly have a story and time of meditation before we go. That is the other slice of bread.

So what do the members feel about it? Why do they come? "It's

a space where adults can be playful and creative together – it is very grounding – we create our own community"

"It's a wonderful mix"

"We practice the Unitarian message of acceptance"

"It is very peaceful, it refreshes you and prepares you with meditation and time with friends"

"I was amazed at how those lively boys went peacefully into a 10 minute musical meditation".

This model is not really so very different from an adult group with its opening and closing ritual and its filling, its theme of choice, be it books/knitting or another craft/discussion topics/poetry, etc.

*The Rev Lindy Latham is minister at Bristol.*



*York Bright Lights participants digging a garden with 'Edible York'.*



# All kinds of things that we cherish

Harold MacMillan was Tory prime minister back in the so-called swinging 60s and is memorable for a number of phrases, including the one about 'selling off the family silver'. This was in a speech in 1985 in reference to the disposing of government assets and pretending this was income. The comparison was with a family in financial trouble. "First of all the Georgian silver goes; and then all that nice furniture that used to be in the salon; then the Canalettos go." I was reminded of these words when I learned that the UU congregation in Dorchester, Massachusetts recently sold its communion vessels and other silver items dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries, at Sotheby's in New York, for \$1.7 million. The items sold included those donated to the church by members over the years, mostly in wills. "It was difficult for the congregation to [sell the silver], but we have a \$5 million restoration project for our building," senior minister Arthur Lavoie said. He added, "The congregation realized that if we didn't act soon to do this work, we wouldn't be able to save the building. And the building is more important than the silver."

In recent years other UU congregations have done something similar. A number of our UK congregations possess similar valuable items, and I'll never forget the wide-eyed look on the face of Cliff Reed when he appeared on the *Antiques Road Show* with the Ipswich Meeting House communion vessels and was told their value. Can we imagine any of our congregations selling off treasures like these?

\* \* \*

Our local cinema is a delight. No 'multiplex studio', this is a good, old fashioned, independent picture house, with squashy seats and pleated curtains that are raised and lowered by an audibly groaning electric motor. An usher sells ice cream from a tray in the interval as we sit on the back row, watching old Pearl and Dean adverts. Recent offerings have included *The Iron Lady*, too soft-centered, I think, to tell much about the real Margaret Thatcher, despite an Oscar-winning performance by Meryl Streep. (The problem of ageing was dealt with much better in *Iris* [2001], with the BAFTA-winning Judi Dench.) *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, again with Judi Dench, was also good on ageing, and very entertaining, despite a little stereotyping. This picture house was an ideal place to see the Oscar-winning *The Artist*, a remarkably realistic trip down memory lane to the silent movies of the 1920s. The story is filled with simple vices of pride, stubbornness and unwillingness to change, and the equally simple virtues of loyalty, faithfulness and the love that conquers all. Some people used to preach sermons like that. Happy days.

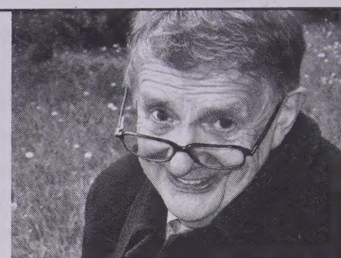
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Sad to learn of the death of Keith Treacher, who was an influence on me and other young Unitarians back in the 1950s. I recall a very kind letter he wrote to encourage me on my way to Unitarian College to train for the ministry, and my sadness when he himself left it. He is the only person I ever met who refused to buy Mazda electric light bulbs (a brand no longer available) as he felt it would be offensive to members of the Parsee faith. For them, Ahura Mazda is the god of wisdom and light, hence the choice of the name. "I wonder what Christians might think if they saw 'Jesus Christ' light bulbs on sale, as Christ is the light of the world?" he asked.

Thoughts about the apparent trivialisation, implying lack of

## Funny Old World

By  
John Midgley



respect for matters that others hold as sacred, came into my mind when I learned of complaints from the Buddhist Centre in Manchester, some years ago. They were about depictions of the Buddha used as the decor of a trendy bar in the city centre, where alcohol (and who knows what other substance) was consumed. I took the point and avoided the place, not that it was my kind of haunt anyway. Only recently, in a local shop, I saw a decidedly tacky statuette of a 'Lucky Buddha' for sale. Lucky? Since when did the quest for enlightenment have anything to do with luck? I didn't buy one, nor am I likely to patronise that shop. Did Keith Treacher make me over-sensitive?

Thoughts of the difficulties around depictions of important religious figures reminds me of the time, some years ago, when the GA Religious Education Department (of blessed memory) collaborated with the GA Publicity Department (also of blessed memory) and produced the first Unitarian Travelling Display. It consisted of a set of display boards, one of which had a picture of Jesus. Someone at the time rather cheekily said that the image looked more like Mick Jagger. Since then I have been keeping an eye out for a picture of Jesus that would suit Unitarians, as we endeavour to keep to the GA Object, to 'uphold the Liberal Christian tradition'. All I have ever seen have either been of sweetly sentimental 'gentle Jesus', or of the supernatural 'sacred heart' Christ. None that I have seen portray a radical rabbi.

I have enjoyed friendships with a number of rabbis over the years, and most of them have been blessed with what is thought of as a Jewish sense of humour, something recognisable but notoriously difficult to define. None, however, were as amusing as Jackie Mason, rabbi-turned-comedian with a delightful New Yorker (or should I say 'Noo Yoiker') Jewish accent. A recent castaway on *Desert Island Discs*, he spiced up his life story with some characteristic gags. When asked about sushi, he said, "It's crazy. Nobody ate raw fish until they called it sushi. Somebody says to you, 'Have a piece of fish, I forgot to cook it,' what would you think? I reckon it was invented by two Jews who wanted to open a restaurant without a kitchen!"

His willingness to tell seemingly anti-Jewish jokes puts me on edge, a little. I once attended the induction service of a Reform rabbi who came out with a remark that brought roars of laughter from the congregation, but left me wondering whether it was all right for me to laugh, or not. In his installation address he mentioned that one project he had been appointed to lead was a major fund-raising drive for the synagogue. "That's all right by me," he said. "There is nothing in this world gives me greater pleasure than getting money out of Jews!" I think I might use that one some time, but make it all right by saying 'Unitarians' instead.

*The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.*



# Taking asylum appeals to London

By Bob Pounder

The asylum campaign for Abdoulaye Diabate and Taha Ghasemi supported by members of Oldham Unitarian Chapel reached a new stage yesterday (20.3.12) as both men met Oldham's MPs, Debbie Abrahams and Michael Meacher at Westminster.

The MPs took time out from an extremely busy day (before going off to deal with the Health and Social Care Bill as it went through Parliament) so that they could receive petitions containing 2000 signatures. The petitions are to be presented to the Home Office and are seeking leave for both men to remain in the UK on compassionate grounds.

Both MPs spoke favourably about the progress of this campaign and promised their continuing support. Abdoulaye Diabate also took the opportunity, to present Debbie Abrahams MP with a copy of his fresh appeal prepared by the Manchester immigration solicitors: Latitude Law. The new legal appeal was completed on 16 March and contains expert witness evidence.

Bob Pounder the minister for Oldham Unitarian Chapel said, "We are receiving great support from the MPs, from our supporters and members of other Unitarian churches throughout the country.



(l-r) Jim Corrigan (Unitarian ministry Student), Bob Pounder, Abdoulaye Diabate, Debbie Abrahams MP, Michael Meacher MP, Taha Ghasemi, and Derek McAuley, Chief Officer of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. The MPs are holding the petitions and fresh appeals for leave to remain in the UK. Photo by Kari Mahwood

"The legal work continues to be funded from the generous donations of individuals, churches, and through fundraising.

"The measure of support for this campaign may be judged by the fact that our Oldham MPs could meet us in London and find time to give us their support and that the Chief Officer of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches,

Derek McAuley, on behalf of the denomination is backing the campaign nationally."

To help the campaign for asylum for Abdoulaye Diabate and Taha Ghasemi, get in touch with the Rev Bob Pounder at Oldham Unitarian Church or email: [bob.pounder@zen.co.uk](mailto:bob.pounder@zen.co.uk)

*The Rev Bob Pounder is minister at Oldham Unitarian Chapel.*

## Celebrate a virtual flower communion

By Petr Samojský

This year the Czech Unitarians will celebrate the 90th Anniversary of the founding the Prague Unitarian congregation. The official day recognized as the beginning of the movement is April 9th 1922, when over a thousand people proclaimed out loud: "In love of truth and freedom, and in the spirit of the greatest revivalists of humankind, we join to the service of God and humanity. In the shrine of my conscience I sincerely promise to strive to be a good member of Free Brotherhood." After the proclamation they welcomed each other into membership by shaking hands. This was the official beginning of the organisation known today as the Religious Society of Czech Unitarians.

The celebration of the Czech Unitarians emphasises the 90 year existence of liberal faith in the hard times of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia (1939-1945) followed by 40 years of a Communist regime (1948-1989). The celebration also reminds us of the movement's powerful mission, which emphasises tolerance and acceptance of each other over differences which put boundaries between us. This notion was reflected also in the Flower Communion, which has its origin

in Prague in 1924, and has since been adopted by many Unitarian Universalist congregations around the world.

This year the Czech Flower Communion will be international, and to highlight our 90th Anniversary, we invite other Unitarian Universalists from around the world to join the Czech Unitarians in this special service. The International Flower Communion will take place in the Unitaria building in Prague on June 10, 2012. A special Flower Communion composition was created for the event by Czech composer Karel Loula, the service will be recorded and streamed on the web.

If you cannot attend in person, the Czech Unitarians invite Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists from all around the world to join us in our 90th Anniversary Flower Communion by sending a "virtual flower" – it can be a group photo or a photo from a special event, but the picture should contain a flower, symbolising the group or individuals. The pictures will be presented during the Flower Communion service together with the flowers brought by participants.

You may find more information on the website [www.unitaria.cz/flowercommunion.htm](http://www.unitaria.cz/flowercommunion.htm)

*The Rev Dr Petr Samojský is leader of Prague Unitarians.*



# Letters to the Editor

## A booming laugh in the face of 'temptation'

To the Editor:

I enjoyed Gavin Lloyd's report on the Service of Reconciliation at Westminster Abbey to mark the anniversary of the Great Ejection, with its lively account of URC Moderators and Anglican Primates, 'in full fig', fawning over each other. He referred to the Archbishop of Canterbury's thoughtful address, during which he spoke of those dissenters who had '*resisted the temptations of Unitarianism*.' I was greatly cheered, on a dank and miserable Monday morning, by the image of Gavin Lloyd's great booming laugh ringing out through Westminster Abbey, at the Archbishop's reference to our religious persuasion being a temptation. Let us proudly go forth, continuing our journey into the abominable temptation of free thought.

**Maud Robinson**

Minister

Unitarians in Edinburgh

## Anglican Church could use more reconciliation

To the Editor:

I was surprised by the colour pictures which Westminster Abbey supplied you with (*Inquirer* 17 March 2). They hardly tell the story of the United Reformed Church/Church of England reconciliation service – Archbishop John Sentamu sharing the peace with two other Anglicans – a woman and an archbishop! In fact my first thought on seeing your front page picture was that this was the same John Sentamu who used the 1662 *Act of Uniformity* to justify his objection to gay marriage when he told Andrew Marr (BBC TV Sunday, 11 March) that the proponents of gay marriage 'have got a problem because the definition of marriage is in the 1662 prayer book and article 30 of the Church of England, which both are acts of parliament.'

I enjoyed Gavin Lloyd's article about the Abbey service but he will forgive my pointing out that he has propagated a significant error by writing that among the ejected clergy 'there were a number who could justly be regarded as Unitarian'. In fact the number was one – John Cooper, a Cheltenham school-teacher who was a disciple of the Socinian John Biddle (d. 1662) who was

not an ejected clergyman.

Nevertheless many of our older congregations with Presbyterian roots, but which were *not* part of what the Abbey service sheet quaintly described as 'the remnant of English trinitarian Presbyterians of Old Dissent' may rightly claim ejected ministers in their ministerial succession. Jane Barraclough, in your same issue, rightly claims Henry Newcome at Cross Street, Manchester as one of these.

I also wonder whether Richard Baxter (whose pulpit is in our Kidderminster church) would have appreciated Gavin identifying him as 'a Dissenter'. He, indeed, did become a Dissenter but a most reluctant one as the passage from his *Reformed Pastor* read at the beginning of the Abbey service might suggest. Nevertheless it was Baxter who wrote 'I would have had the brethren to have offered the parliament the Creed, Lord's Prayer and Decalogue alone as our essentials or fundamentals . . .

And whereas they still said, "A Socinian or a Papist will subscribe all this," I answered them: So much the better'.

**Andrew M Hill**

York

## We must respect the common space we inhabit

To the Editor:

I have been around Luton for quite a few years. I am in the town centre most days. I say this because two TV documentaries I have recently watched do not reflect the Luton I know. I happened to be in the town centre at lunchtime on the day the Anglian regiment marched through the town. I missed the parade, though I was aware of the tension that existed, as there was a standoff between the protesters and those supporting the troops. It is hard to believe that was only three years ago. Again, on lunchtime, I was in the town centre when English Defence League (EDL) members paraded up and down the town centre as they awaited the outcome of sentence of one of their members. On both occasions I have felt the same community tension that I experienced on occasions growing up in Northern Ireland.

The TV viewer receives a view of Luton that, thankfully, is rarely part of the daily life of the town. These days I find myself drawing on my own experience of faith and community in an attempt to

understand another's. The difficulties in Luton I think are about the clash of two kingdoms and the resultant power struggle.

The image of Islam for those with little knowledge of it is a religion of hate. Yet the Muslims I know never speak of hate. It is true the Qur'an in parts makes for difficult reading but when I consider the Old Testament I am reminded that there too are difficult passages.

I spoke with a member of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association UK. He was so keen to inform me of the great virtues of Islam to counter the hate image.

A while ago I discovered the poetry of Rumi, a 13th century Muslim. Rumi came from the Sufi tradition, which is considered the mystical branch of Islam. When I read Sufi writings I read of the power of love. We have a responsibility to represent our views but not to use the name of our God to endorse them.

The tension in Luton is about people sharing space, though having a jumble sale of values. Somehow together we have to work out how we can respect the space that we all inhabit.

**Gordon Jackson**

London Colney

## Let's talk about a name change

To the Editor:

Time to call ourselves Unitarian Universalists? It most certainly is! (*Inquirer* 17 March)

I think to add Universalist to our name would make us more accessible to the public, who, if they have even heard of us still think we are a weird and wonderful sect. We fail miserably to explain ourselves to the public. The public like to think that a religious group is worldwide. It would dispel notions that we are a small group of individuals who just deny the trinity.

Most people have never heard of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists or the International Association for Religious Freedom. It's time for us to see the bigger picture and change with the times. As Janet Briggs said in her recent letter, let's talk about it.

**Wilna Roberts**

Sevenoaks Kent



Keith Treacher

## Minister, hill walker and youth leader

Keith Treacher, who died on 6 March 2012 aged 88 years, was one of a number of ex-military young men who entered Unitarian College Manchester (UCM) to train for the ministry in the austere yet idealistic immediate post-war years.

His navy career had been brief and troubled. Having rapidly achieved officer rank and seen active service, he underwent a profound change of heart and became a conscientious objector. This led first to imprisonment and later to work in charge of German POWs, for whom he later campaigned for their repatriation, which he believed had been unnecessarily delayed.

Sheila Jones of Manchester recalls: "When Keith was at UCM, there was, at that time, a craze among students for climbing the Manchester University buildings. The University tackled this problem by setting up a climbing committee, with Keith as chair. Mysteriously, all reports of climbing buildings ceased from then on! But he did indulge similar exploits at Golders Green; he and Paul Adams published the available climbing routes up the church building."

He left UCM in 1951 for a brief ministry in the Midlands, followed by seven notable years at Golders Green, the main focus being young people, whom he inspired with his passion for the outdoor life, rock-climbing and mountaineering. He was instigator of the Unitarian President's Award Scheme and he advised Sir John Hunt on setting up the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. Roger Mason, still connected to Golders Green, writes: "Keith founded a successful youth group here ... whose former members in Britain and Canada still keep in touch. In 1957 he led the Young Unitarian Arnoy expedition, with financial support from the Everest Foundation as well as Unitarian sources, and took seven young people to a remote island north of the Arctic Circle in Norway to ascend unclimbed peaks and make botanical, glacial, geographical and geological reconnaissance. It was a life-changing experience for us.

"He also led a later Young Unitarian expedition to the Romsdal district of western Norway. When I last talked to him, he said that his proudest achievement was that he avoided any fatal accidents or serious injuries on his mountaineering, canoeing and sailing expeditions, in days when our equipment was primitive and health and safety training didn't exist." Keith's

charismatic yet laid-back style led to the Unitarian ministry for (at least) two young people. Keith Hill, now retired from the ministry in Kingswood, Birmingham, remembers:

"Treacher's was an outstanding

ministry. I can see him now, in a pantomime in Chinese costume, as Aladdin or some such. But his real passion was climbing and hill walking, especially in Wales, where I often went with him. He was a good friend and companion. In his later life he took to canoeing, and on one occasion took himself across Southampton Water. He was spotted by the coastguard boat, which went out to pick him up. I don't know what his reaction was, but I can guess!"

After further short ministries in the north of England and Southampton, Keith realised that all he really wanted was to work with young people and enjoy the outdoor life. He departed for a career in professional youth leadership, in Warwickshire and Berkshire, returning from time to time to be of help, when asked, to the GA's Youth Department. He often wrote about climbing and climbers, as well as some poetry, and valued highly his membership of the Rucksack Club. He published Siegfried Herford: an Edwardian Rock-Climber (Ernest Press, 2000), which received many favourable reviews. His spiritual home became the Society of Friends, and his was a Quaker funeral. He is affectionately remembered, with smiles and tales of legendary exploits. One respondent to his obituary notice in The Times wrote: "A most pleasant, caring and thoughtful friend. The greatest pleasure to have known you. Thank you Keith."

Many Unitarians, Quakers, climbers and hill-walkers would concur.

— John Midgley



## Former organist marks 100th birthday

Connie Smithson was the long-term organist at St Helens Unitarian Church until it closed in 1998 – the church that Lord Haw-Haw mentioned as having received a direct hit in one of his broadcasts. And Connie was there then, and had been since a little girl.

On 16 February this year she celebrated 100 years on this earth, in her Care Home in Newton-le-Willows, near St Helens. And a good party she had with the other residents, plus pupils from her Dancing Classes over the years, including their children and

grandchildren, together with those of us from the church – still able, including Rev John Roberts, her minister for 20 years. There was a card from the Queen and a photographer from the local paper (who took this picture).



Connie had it all, and seemed to enjoy it. She was a very popular lady, for whom in her later years the church was her life. We say "God Bless and Well Done".

— Daphne Roberts, (who has enjoyed many a chat and a lovely tea, set out in the old style, as was her wont.)





## Celebrating Send-a-Child to Hucklow

Over the past 50 years thousands of disadvantaged children, from all over the country, have been provided with a holiday in the Derbyshire countryside. This has been made possible by Unitarians working through the charity Send-a-Child-to-Hucklow (SACH).

This year many congregations are holding a special celebratory service to mark those 50 years. One of the first such services was held at Mansfield where our photograph shows some of the members of staff and pupils from a local Primary School who attended the service, and who will be going on one of the holidays this coming June.

They were joined by 59-year-old Terry Mansfield, from Leicester, (first left on top row) who went on the holidays as a boy in the 1960s, and by two local Trustees of the charity, and the minister, the Rev Patrick Timperley.

The acting headteacher of the Primary School spoke of the needs of many of the children – some 9- and 10-year-olds have never been on a holiday anywhere! – and thanked the Unitarians for the work that they are continuing to do.

The collection on that Sunday morning was £225, and was sent to SACH. For more information on SACH, or to donate see:

<http://bit.ly/H8ulRg>

Or, send a cheque to Donations Treasurer: The Rev. Chris Goacher, 19 Demontfort Road, Hinckley, Leics. LE10 1LQ  
Tel: 01455 636602

Email: [Donations\\_Treasurer@sendachildtohucklow.org.uk](mailto:Donations_Treasurer@sendachildtohucklow.org.uk)

*The photograph was taken by 16 year old Josh Brown who became a Member of the Old Meeting House in Mansfield on that Sunday morning.*

## UCA elects new moderator

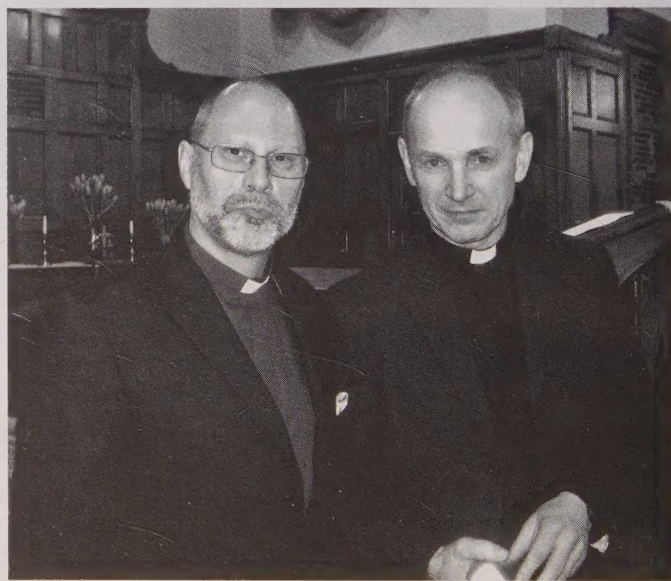
The Rev Bob Pounder has been elected as the new Moderator of the Unitarian Christian Association (UCA), to replace the Rev Jeff Gould who stood down after serving his two years of office. The election took place at the Association's annual general meeting at Stalybridge Unitarian Church in Cheshire on 17 March.

The meeting heard that the UCA has already raised £3,000 towards the maternal health project it is supporting in the West African state of Sierra Leone, in association with Christian Aid. Bob Pounder expressed 'profound gratitude' for the generosity of individual Unitarians and congregations in achieving this sum in the five months since the Kailahun health appeal was launched. He appealed for the fund-raising drive to continue 'equally strongly'.

Two Christian Aid representatives told the meeting about progress towards improving health care in eastern Sierra Leone, where the project is based. The focus of Christian Aid week this year will be Sierra Leone, and they called on Unitarians to support both the week, and the Kailahun project. They emphasised this mainly-Muslim country is still recovering from a devastating civil war, and they stressed that Christian Aid supports people of 'all religions and none'.

Jeff Gould is to continue serving on the UCA officer group, as Events Officer. The other serving officers were all re-elected at the meeting: Denise Birks (secretary), Cathy Fozard (treasurer and membership), Alex Bradley (chaplain), Jean Bradley (retreats) and Jim Corrigan (UCA *Herald* editor).

*– Jim Corrigan*



Jeff Gould congratulates Bob Pounder (right) on his election as the new UCA Moderator. Photo by Jim Corrigan

## The Inquirer has a new website!

# [www.inquirer.org.uk](http://www.inquirer.org.uk)